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ABSTRACT

Professional journalists need to be encouraged in their quest for objectivity if the news media are to be saved from degenerating into political journals and propaganda organs. Sociologist Karl Mannheim's theory of relationalism could be the basis for an improved approach to journalistic practice and should be required reading for journalism majors and other aspiring journalists. Mannheim claims objectivity is attainable not through the exclusion of evaluations but through the critical awareness and control of them. Applying this theory to journalistic practice could help newswriters to better detect their biases, balance them with differing perspectives solicited from others, and obtain a more objective consensus concerning the "facts" of any news event. Other efforts to foster journalistic objectivity and sharper skepticism could include broadening the range of backgrounds from which the members of the profession are recruited, enlarging the scope of their education, strengthening the self-examination and self-criticism aspects of their training, teaching them the investigative skills needed to ferret out all aspects of a news event, challenging their conclusions constantly, and encouraging them to exploit as thoroughly as possible every resource possessed by a newsgathering and reporting organization to increase the variety of available viewpoints. (AEA)

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THE QUEST FOR JOURNALISM'S HOLY GRAIL

Some Thoughts on the Continuing Pursuit of Objectivity and its Implications for Professional Education

By John De Mott

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After the elementary writing skills and capabilities for basic fact-gathering have been developed, the central problem in achieving genuine professional competence in journalism becomes that of cultivating one's objectivity.

The problem of objectivity will always be the crucial one in journalism. For unless a journalist can call upon his own variety of background, breadth of education, mind-opening kind of training, diversification of experience, and an extensive range of perspectives represented in the collective organization of his communications medium to make a superior degree of objectivity apparent in his work, then he has no legitimate claim to society's trust and confidence.

Many will argue that the preceding statement is not true. Perhaps it isn't adequate as a natural history type description of journalism in our day, but it's a logical expression of the general normative theory which most journalists use in their evaluation of professional performance--the performance of other journalists, at least.

Most journalists in the United States profess to believe in the ideal of journalistic objectivity. A newspaper or any other medium of such communication should report the news in an objective, impartial, unbiased, unprejudiced manner, according to the ideal, and such media should serve as benchmarks of factual truth in the discourse of public affairs. That is the ideology which prevails in journalism today, at least as far as its standard profession of faith is concerned.

Perhaps never having read Karl Mannheim's "Ideology and Utopia," some journalists are compromising that essential faith, however. Perfect objectivity will always elude us, they point out, because it is impossible. Even the most dedicated among us has to agree on that point, but at that point our paths part.

Having discovered that they are not supermen, members of the disillusioned minority among us have started a reactionary movement that threatens to divide the profession at a most critical point in its development.

Unless the hard core of real professionals faithful to journalism's prevailing ideology can be strengthened and encouraged to continue its quest for more objectivity, American news media---the best on earth, despite their faults---could degenerate into political journals and propaganda organs like those in continental Europe.

In the reaction provoked by its superficial reading of relativistic thought, the minority among us gets occasional encouragement from a social scientist.

Under the influence of inherited thought that doesn't fit journalistic fact today, some political scientists and sociologists tend to equate the exercise of freedom of speech and expression generally with that of the press. Except for editorializing, there is no common denominator of meaningful comparison between their present functions. On the contrary, the two derivative purposes are opposites in an important sense. The purpose of free speech and other "agitative" liberties is to facilitate the development of interaction between ideologies and utopias: the purpose of journalism, as a profession, is to provide solid benchmarks or reliable points of reference for reconciling thought patterns to the facts; and in measuring the epistemic correlation of theories.

In a patronizing manner that pleases unprofessional journalists but infuriates the real professionals, a social scientist occasionally will praise the news media as indispensable agents in the political dialogue essential to a democratic society. Even though newsmen can't be objective, really, and tend to be quite partisan at times, they are nevertheless important in stimulating trade in that marvelous (though fictitious) open market place of ideas. The newsman should therefore be tolerated---cherished, perhaps.

The professional journalist doesn't want to be tolerated, or even cherished. He has no desire to be some sort of glorified opinion-monger. No. The professional journalist wants to be respected; and for this good reason: the superior objectivity which he brings to bear in giving the public its intelligence of current events.

If the preceding sounds a bit hyper-critical of certain social scientists, it should be noted that any expert may appear terribly naive when he ventures into another profession's field of operation.

The social scientist can teach the journalist countless things; but little about journalism as a profession. The professional journalist, in turn, can teach the social scientist; but nothing about social science as such.

Studies in social science have done much to improve the profession of journalism. Through the application of findings from the field of communications research, journalists are upgrading their performance steadily, and analytical insights paying additional dividends in the future can be anticipated from the continued development of the sociology of knowledge as a sub-discipline

in the social sciences.

The sociology of knowledge and communications research represent two styles of approach to the same subject matter, as Kurt Wolff points out. Through imaginative integration of the two approaches, a more mature ideology and more comprehensive normative theory will be formulated, it is hoped, to guide journalism into more productive and effective service.

The most favorable locale for such theory construction, of course, is the campus of a university; and the relationship between journalism and the social sciences reaches its sharpest focus in education for journalism. For example, since leaving professional journalism to teach at a university, I have been forced to think much more often and more deeply about its problems--that of objectivity, especially.

At first, I became alarmed. Some journalism students appeared unimpressed by arguments in favor of cultivating the maximum amount of objectivity toward a news event. In the excitement of their discovering that complete objectivity was impossible, they appeared to have given up the struggle to achieve even a decent degree.

Since it isn't possible to be unbiased really, why waste one's time trying? That's their attitude. Why not admit one's biases to one's readers and then go about employing one's captive medium of communication as an instrument of needed social change? When one has such sincere and strong opinions, why should a journalist permit a futile striving for perfection to frustrate him and inhibit his playing the role of ideologue? It's unfair competition in the market place of ideas? So what?

Because of such ideas expressed by some students, I began to think that our entire educational system might be on the brink of destruction by relativism. Glancing around academe, and getting better acquainted with some of my colleagues, I began to wonder if the modern university wasn't an intellectual jungle. In their teaching, some professors appeared to be giving their students the idea that one man's opinion is just as good as another's. Since there appeared to be no objective standards, students were being encouraged to just think---to think about anything in any way. It didn't matter how well one thought, just so he thought.

In my own now redoubled search for greater objectivity, I am most grateful to Karl Mannheim.

Mannheim's sociology of knowledge has given me a new appreciation of our most important problem in journalism. No student should be admitted to our profession in future years without having been exposed to Mannheim's general theory.

"A new kind of objectivity...is attainable not through the exclusion of evaluations but through the critical awareness and control of them."

In that statement from Mannheim's book, it seems to me, can be found the basis for an improved approach to journalistic practice.

In the past, the journalist has tried to remain aloof, detached and remote from the subjective substance of his inquiry. At the same time, his function required a detailed knowledge of the subject's empirical fact. Forced into such a paradoxical position, the not so tough-minded often becomes confused.

In reading Mannheim's book, the journalist becomes aware of his own preconceptions---the strong deterministic influence of an arrested form of the liberal-humanitarian utopia on our concept of journalism's function in society, for example.

In addition, the journalist is able to recognize the logical fault that underlies the libertarian concept of the press. It is an unmasking of the ideology which prevails in modern government without a corresponding recognition that our own concept of the government's designs on freedom of the press are determined by social conditions.

The realization that our definition of news itself is one dictated by experience and environment is a sobering one, and the thought is beginning to haunt journalism daily, as it should.

Thrown back upon itself, in Mannheim's terms, the profession of journalism might be tempted to question its traditional function today, and to doubt its purpose. The solution of our most crucial problem is not, however, in denying its existence, in minimizing its importance, or abandoning our efforts to solve it. Neither is the answer in abdicating our office. The acknowledgement that every man's thought has been conditioned by his past and its social context, the recognition that every man has his biases and prejudices, and the admission that every man is incapable of complete objectivity are not sufficient cause for surrendering our ideal. Our ideology will need to be changed, but not abandoned.

Although we have several limitations, objectivity will always be possible to a significant degree---perhaps a pivotal degree---in journalism.

If we explore the implications of Mannheim's "relationalism" theory, applying it to our practice, we should be able to better detect our own biases, to balance them with differing perspectives solicited from others, and to obtain a more objective social consensus concerning the "facts" of any news event.

In order to foster more journalistic objectivity, we need to broaden the range of backgrounds from which the members of our profession are recruited, enlarge the scope of their education, toughen the self-examination and self-criticism aspects of their training, teach them the investigative skills they will need to ferret out the numerous "angles" in any news event, require them to "walk all the way around" each occurrence, challenge their conclusions constantly, encourage them to exploit as thoroughly as possible every resource possessed by a news-gathering and reporting organization for increasing the variety of viewpoints available in any given situation, and direct them in action designed to stimulate them to think more objectively.

Most important of all, perhaps, we must instill in our students a sharper skepticism, especially toward those who say there are no objective standards for determining empirical fact, and a deeper commitment to each man's personal quest for more objectivity.

We need to promote the development of objectivity as a more demanding ideology within our profession; to nourish the social roots of our concepts commanding the effort at objectivity.

The social context and conditions that broaden perspective, breed second thoughts and nurse the tentative temperament need to be protected, strengthened and expanded throughout the journalistic establishment.

It is possible, however, that the experiences making up my own past, conditioned by their social context, have ordained that I create just another unneeded utopia. Thrown back upon myself again, I shall be rethinking this in the future, and seeking out conflicting ideas to promote greater objectivity toward my own conception of our profession's ideology.

Thanks to Karl Mannheim.

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(Plus appropriate readings on scientific method, theories of reality, epistemology, solipsism and solipsistic philosophy, the sociology of knowledge, learning theories in psychology, general semantics and propaganda and its analysis.)

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